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WIVES - OF THE ORGANIZATION¹

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Abstract

The following essay formalizes a talk I gave at a conference on women and work in 1990. I spoke outside of my established interests and formal training but found the assignment surprisingly engaging. Why were the young women I was teaching so predictably restrained / occasionally strident? Why was I less effective than I wanted to be as an organizational actor? There seemed to be strong forces pushing us all to subvert success. I explored the dynamics of gendered interactions in the hope that we could help each other by improving our capacity to say no, relinquishing control over the trivial, sharing relational tasks, expecting more from male colleagues (and less from female colleagues), focus, choosing voice and exit, and being more reflective.

Key words: women in organizations, gender relations in organizations, female professionals, female success

Introduction

Perhaps you share with me a deep melancholy that, despite obvious advances in the last twenty years or so, the tide does not seem to be changing in the flow of responsibility between women and men. While some things have changed, more have stayed the same. It is not an advance, for example, that most women now have two jobs, one inside the home and one outside. It is not an advance that the salary gap for those jobs outside the home has narrowed by just one dime in the last twenty years,² or that no-fault divorce can leave the within home contribution even less protected than it was in the past.

¹ Originally presented at the Women & Work Conference, Arlington, TX, May 11, 1990 organized by Kathleen Underwood. In articulating these ideas, I have benefited from conversations with many people. Jim Huff, Mary Oberg, and Larry Stimpert have been especially useful sources, sounding boards, and critics.

² Catherine Stimpson, "Feminism and the Workplace." Presented at the Women & Work Conference, Arlington, TX, May 1990.

The "good news" from the past twenty years often includes the increasing number of women found in the professional ranks - in medicine, law, engineering, and business. But I continue to be melancholy when I think about women in the professions. As a business school professor, I know that despite near equality in the proportions of men and women seeking undergraduate business degrees, and despite the fact that in most MBA programs at least 1 out of every 3 people seeking a degree is female, women are not rising as rapidly as men once they leave the university and join the work force. The same is true in all the professions. Though we might very well question whether "rising to the top" is a desirable goal, it is still bad news that women who establish that objective find it is so difficult to achieve.

I think I see some of the reasons for this lack of success in my classroom. Most of the people trying to write down every word are female; most of the people who sit back and try to get the big picture are male. When there is a team project, too often they meet at her apartment and eat the brownies she made or bought while they work. Too often most of the library research is done by the females on the team while the young men make the presentation.

The pattern - of her focusing on detail and people and him standing further back, operating on a larger scale, especially visible at the point of evaluation - means that as they advance through their careers, the women have jobs (and titles) that may sound quite interesting but their male counterparts move ahead of them. The men are more likely to have primary responsibility for major projects; they are more likely to be named as heads of major divisions in their companies. I will argue, in an intentionally provocative way, that this uneven allocation of rewards may in fact be justified. Despite the long hours most professional women devote to their jobs, very few have learned how to make or have been allowed to make the decisive contributions that merit extraordinary recognition.

My concern with this dynamic has a very specific starting point. A few years ago I was asked to co-chair a committee preparing a proposal to the IBM Corporation. IBM had established a competition to provide twelve schools of business with two million dollar grants each to support increased competence in the management and use of information. To make a long story short, we successfully obtained one of the grants. It served as a platform to attract other money from the university and from private business - perhaps five or six million dollars came into the business school at the University of Illinois in the ensuing five years because we won the competition.

I enjoy writing proposals; I like to see if I can "hit the target." This was the first time that I had worked on a subject that did not intensely interest me - but in the process of co-authoring the proposal I persuaded myself, as well as IBM, that our approach was a sound and important one.

When the dean of my college resigned and planned to delay initiating the project until a successor could be found, I was unwilling to let that vision evaporate and therefore became the director of a new unit within the college that among other things administered the IBM grant.

It was an ideal position in many ways. I enjoyed working with faculty and our corporate partners to define the new unit's mission and activities. In a time of tight resources I had resources. In a time of increasing politics and turf protection, largely

created by tight resources, I was able to operate in the interdisciplinary fashion I prefer. It was very hard work. It took a much greater toll on my family than I anticipated. It also was fun and I enjoyed the campus and business access that the office provided.

Over time, however, I began to resent the fact that I did not receive any tangible reward for my ongoing energy or for a substantial infusion of cash and important new technology into my college. I began to suspect that I was doing far more in the job than many of my male counterparts in other universities, but I was also unsure that the extra effort was making that much difference. My academic colleagues were moving ahead, and I began to suspect that the intellectual life that initially drew me to the university would always be a secondary part of my day as an administrator. I fell into the habit of too often asking the people closest to me to make sacrifices in order to facilitate other people who were much less important to me. In retrospect, I am extraordinarily thankful that another faculty member was eager for the job; I walked away with little guilt or regret.

In talking with other people about this foray into administration, I developed a humorous description of what happened: "I came to see," I would explain, "that being an administrator is the worst of being the traditional wife. What those around you want are hot meals on time. They do not want to know how it is done. They rarely say thank you. Nonetheless it all has to be done over again the next day. "

I now take the idea of the traditional wife in the organization much more seriously. A subset of organizational activities, though sometimes important, is largely invisible, unrewarded, and not necessarily rewarding. Some men attend to the "care and feeding" of those who work for and around them. It disturbs me that without exception the careers of the few responsive men I know are not as externally noteworthy as most of their colleagues. Women seem to be much more responsive to organizational needs. As they rise in the professional ranks, they appear to be taking over - and even creating - a disproportionate share of maintenance activities, and again, almost without exception, their careers suffer for it.

Profile of the Organization Wife

The traditional male/female dynamic is deeply rooted in the childhood experiences many of us share, but it is reinforced by the growing needs of organizations for relational skills. Almost all the female professionals I know are overly committed to time consuming but often unnoticed and unrewarded aspects of organizational life. I believe that just as we are collectively shedding traditional 'wifely' roles in the home, we are rapidly assuming them in the work place, especially in the professional ranks where the traps have been less clearly articulated.

Let me describe the person who takes on 'wifely' tasks and then look at one instance of the role in action. First of all, the organization wife recognizes personal differences, is usually aware of other people's needs, and tries to fill those needs. We know when Joe feels bad about losing a contract, when Sarah is eager to receive a new assignment. And I deliberately say "we" here because I want to challenge myself, and the women in the audience, to consider how snugly this shoe fits. Because we recognize these things more often, because we think about them more often, we are more likely to do something about them.

We work to assuage hard feelings; we try to make the right things happen. We say something to Joe. We put Sarah's name in the hopper. We think about giving the going away party; we call or write the colleague who is in the hospital; we try to do something more personal than a passing "I'm sorry" for the colleague whose spouse dies. If we do not actually do these things that need to be done, we carry them on a 'to do' list for weeks, and feel guilty when they are not accomplished.

This ability to keep track of and respond to various nuances and personal needs is part of broader picture. In my experience almost all wives of the organization are detail people. We are expected, and we expect ourselves, to remember what happened at the last meeting. Our less organized colleagues call us for a copy of the memo they have mislaid. They count on us to have summary data from last year's campaign. Even if we have a secretary to carry out such tasks, the implicit assumption seems to be that we will do a better job of getting her - the fact that it is almost never "him" is not my concern for now - to manage details. The cost, in hours per day, of all these activities must be enormous. Yet despite her penchant for details, the organization wife rarely calculates the way her hours are spent. She rarely steps back to see them in perspective.

The organization wife herself is usually bright and competent, but she will often attribute her success more to luck than to her ability. She is deferential in many other ways as well. When her opinion is sought or when rewards are given, she tends to think of and talk about the work of the group rather than her work. She does not seek the limelight; she rarely asserts herself to claim her share of recognition; her name is less likely to appear first on the title page. If she tries to be assertive, she feels awkward and too obvious in making her case.

Instead of asserting ourselves directly, most of us are indirectly persuasive. What we want often happens, but the boss thinks it is his idea - and the fact that the boss is very rarely "her" again is not part of this story. In fact, many of our accomplishments are invisible. We are often a 'sounding board' but we have final decision making authority far less often than our male counterparts.³ A small regret is that we do not receive credit where credit is due for important but less visible interventions. The bigger loss is that we are less likely to be involved in the follow-up projects that bring further learning and more significant recognition.

Many of us are good cheerleaders - encouraging others to do their best; but almost none of us are good task masters. We give soft words of encouragement, but rarely challenge others to rise above their current level of performance. It is unfortunate that the cheerleading takes more of our time than impersonal directives would have consumed. Far worse, our encouraging ways can create a dependence that not only assures a continuing drain on our time, but ultimately subverts the growth of our subordinates.

Another strength of the organization wife is that she is almost certain to be good at negotiating and reconciling different points of view. When two people are at logger-

³ Barbara Reskin and Catherine Ross's study of 222 managers shows, among other things, that "for the bread-and-butter decisions of hiring, firing and authorizing promotions and raises...women (are) more often advisors, while men (call) the shots" (1990, p. 13).

heads, we can often suggest a way of seeing the situation that gives both some satisfaction. A few of us are less diplomatic, falling back into other wifely patterns of getting results by complaining or nagging, but even those who are more abrasive will often sacrifice their own interests to achieve a solution. Nor do we complain about this or other inequities, at least in public.

The list could go on and on, but perhaps you recognize the profile and can provide your own variations. The professional wife thinks about others, organizes details, is deferential, negotiates, seeks peace rather than war. She tends to be softly persuasive, though she can be a harpy. She does not toot her own horn or does so ineffectively. She usually works with positive rather than negative reinforcement.

Men in organizations often have some of these traits; almost all of the women I know in professional positions have many more of them. If this were a workshop, I would ask you to list twenty professional women you know by name, and twenty professional men, and consider the extent to which each one exhibits the many characteristics I have just described. I am absolutely confident we would not need a statistical test to show a significant difference between professional men and women in our collective experience. It is galling to speak in stereotypes. But when I made a quick list of forty professional women I know personally, only two did not fit my definition of the organization wife.

My concern is that the wifely tendencies so many of us share take time. They easily displace needed professional qualities. They lead us to systematically miss opportunities for learning and promotion. Too many of us are spending too much time being wives of our organizations.

An Example: Committee Work

Let me trace the result of playing out feminine expectations for just one organizational activity - committee work. The organization wife tends to serve on too many committees. As she moves up the ladder, she is likely to be appointed first as a token female. The second and third time she is appointed, however, it is also because she did a good job on her last committee assignment. She quickly will find that she is involved in many more such ad hoc activities than male colleagues at her level in the organization.

And she does do good work, especially good detail work. She has better attendance at meetings, and tends to be more punctual. She comes prepared; she's read the files; she's made notes. If it is necessary to meet again, she is less selfish with her time.

Her colleagues come to rely on this behavior. They start arriving less prepared. They begin to miss a few meetings because everything seems to be in good hands. In fact, this is an ideal situation for those who choose to put less effort into these assignments. Although the organization wife does her homework and gets to all the meetings, in most cases she will not express forceful opinions. Thus the other members' time is not wasted, either in preparation or in lobbying for their own point of view against a more informed colleague.

The organization wife may or may not be asked to write up the results of the committee's deliberations. But if she is, she is more likely to draft it in a way that reflects group opinion. She will probably write a longer report than a male colleague would have written. And she is more likely to circulate a draft for comments.

She may or may not be asked to verbally present the results of committee deliberations, but if she is, she will frame the presentation as a product of group action. She again is more likely to cite those who had strong opinions. In short, the organization wife tends to be a good citizen. No doubt, sooner or later, someone will recognize it and warmly thank her for her contribution.

This is not, however, the way she will get her name in lights. It is not the way to ensure that the primary tasks to which she is assigned are done well and done on time. It is not the way she will learn the necessary skills for advancement.

Most important of all, having done the most work, it is highly unlikely that the organizational wife will make the decisive contribution to carrying out the committee's assignment. The most important contributions are made by people who can step back and separate the forest from the trees. They are more likely to pull disparate facts together because their judgment is less clouded by fatigue and detail. The organization wife tends not to be able to make these critical contributions. The very things she excels at, in fact, make it very difficult for her to make more influential judgments.

This is the very heart of my presentation. Organization wives not only exhaust themselves, they behave in ways that anchor them at lower professional levels. Over and above the discrimination they suffer, women too often tend to deny themselves the experiences and opportunities that allow them to rise to the top.

If you are not a wife in your private life, you may think that what I am talking about has less to do with you than other members of the audience. Let me stop here to say explicitly that if you are an unmarried female you are in particular danger. Women become wives of their organizations because all of us - male and female, younger or older, heterosexual or not, currently married or not - know the wifely role as portrayed in infinite, idealized, middle class variation on television, in the press, in the very social air we breathe. We all are subject to this schema in our professional lives.

In fact, I believe I have some advantage over you. In my current organization it is acceptable to leave a meeting early because "I have to drive the kids to soccer practice," to occasionally duck an extra assignment because "we're hosting a party for Jim's department that week." If you are not married, you are likely to find it more difficult to demand that your organization make room for the personal choices you are making. It is not acceptable in my organization to duck out because "I'm headed for aerobics" or even because "I'm co-chairing the recycling committee." Less social support may mean you find it less easy to maintain a life beyond work.

In short, we are all vulnerable. I want to emphasize, however, that I am not advocating we stop serving on committees, do a lousy job, or refuse all service activities. We should all contribute to the communities of which we are a part. However, we should be selective about the assignments we accept. We should try to choose work

that is valuable to the organization and can teach us something valuable. We should think about whether we are doing the most work, and why.

This is important. We must face up to the fact that hard work is rarely the most influential work. We must learn to make tough assessments about all the ways we spend our organizational time. Too many of us excel at things that are a relatively minor part of our jobs, while we miss opportunities to be more influential.

Why Women Become Organizational Wives

Now let me point to five things that seem to make the likelihood of becoming a wife of the organization depressingly high even in the most 'professional' job. The first is that many of us prefer to have more personal connections than most of our male colleagues. That's sounds hopelessly stereotypic, but let me give you a personal example.

My husband Jim is teaching a seminar this semester with a woman from another department. It's new material, it's fun, and it's also hard work. They have met many times to coordinate their efforts. They discuss how things they are reading might affect the course. They have compared their responses to the most recent election. Because she is new to the university, she has asked for and he has given her some career advice.

Nevertheless, he knows relatively little about her professional life beyond this course, and even less about her personal life. He does not know where she lives, whether she has a child, a husband, parents, or other strong connections. He does not know what she did before taking this job. He does not know whether she has been to the new Mexican restaurant in town. He does not know what books she reads for pleasure.

I would know most of these things after having worked with someone on an involving project for several months. I would feel that I was working 'out of context' not to have subsidiary information of this kind. Peter Wimsey makes the same observation in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*:

Well, I mean, all this easy, uninquisitive way men have of makin' casual acquaintances is very fine and admirable and all that - but look how inconvenient it is! Here you are. You admit you've met this bloke two or three times, and all you know about him is that he is tall and thin and retired into some unspecified suburb. A woman, with the same opportunities would have found out his address and occupation, whether he was married, how many children he had, with their names and what they did for a living, what his favorite author was, what food he liked best, the name of his tailor, dentist and boot maker, when he knew your grandfather and what he thought of him - screeds of useful stuff! (Sayers, 1963, p.39)

These are, of course, minor details. As professionals, our first energies are going in the same direction as our male colleagues. When we think about new job assignments, for example, we all ask many of the same questions: How is the task defined? What is expected? Will it be interesting? What resources will be needed? How long should it take? Will it lead to further opportunity? But as women get down to work,

we tend to work with more contextual clues. In the process, we make a move toward wifely behavior.

Lillian Rubin declares we are uniquely vulnerable to the 'relational claims' that grow out of the human connections we value and establish:

His relatively rigid boundaries enable him to shut out the world, to turn himself off; her more permeable ones permit no such easy escape. So she hears; he doesn't. The early constriction of his inner psychic life makes it difficult for him to attend to a variety of emotional demands all at once. Her more expansive inner experience leaves her forever vulnerable to competing relational claims, forever trying to mediate, sort, mend, soothe. (Rubin, 1983, p.167)

This statement follows an interesting interview that illustrates some important differences between men and women:

The husband:

I try, I swear I do. But I don't know what she wants half the time. It's like it's never enough.

The wife:

He tunes out; I just can't believe how he can do that, but he does it. He's not really insensitive, at least I don't think so, but he has this amazing capacity to just stop being there. I mean, he's there, but he's not there.

The husband:

She accuses me of doing some kind of disappearing act, and I'm never sure what she means. I'm sitting right there.

The wife:

He can be sitting in the same room, but he doesn't know what's going on around him. There's a wall around him that you can't get past. The whole place can be up in arms, I can be like a screaming banshee, and he won't even pick his head up out of the magazine he's reading. Or sometimes it'll finally get to him, so he looks up and says in that quiet voice of his. "Hey, what's the matter?" And I feel like I'm crazy.

The husband:

I suppose I do have this ability to shut things out. But what's wrong with that? Why do I have to be involved all the time? Maybe all our lives would be easier if she could do a little more of it.

The wife:

I try sometimes, I really try to do what he does, but it's absolutely impossible to pull it off. It's like there's a radar inside me that always knows what's going on around me all the time, and you can't just switch it off. It's the same thing in the office; I think it's why I'm good at my job, because I know what's going on with people; it's like I keep watch or something. (Rubin, 1983, pp. 165-166)

Almost all the puzzles that motivate this talk can be found in this exchange, and it is easy to imagine a similar dialogue between myself and the men I work with. They shut out a large number of things that are critical to my organizational reality. The ability not to be involved seems to be a key part of their success, while my own more involved way of acting seems to be part of my success. It is as if there is radar inside me that is always keeping watch and I wonder if things would be easier if I could do a little more tuning out. It is almost certainly true that if my male colleagues knew what I was talking about today, they would simply look up and say, without a great deal of interest, "Hey, what's the matter?"

Radar is not the only problem, however. Many men and women are still uncomfortable with women in the workplace - deeply so - even though the evidence of this discomfort is less frequently displayed than it was in the past.⁴ This is a second path to traditional roles in the workplace.

I was forcefully reminded of the raw energies that characterize many work environments on one of my rare consulting assignments. The group I was seeing was gathering in the conference room. A woman came into the room and began to speak animatedly about several pressing problems. Though I had been briefed about those attending the meeting, her name was not on the list, and the head of the unit turned to me in introduction, saying "This is Ellen. The main thing you need to know about her is that she is not married and she is not currently dating anyone." On the surface this information was offered (I think) as explanation for the slightly embarrassing energy and edge with which she was discussing a semi-crisis. Instantly she was deprofessionalized - inappropriately defined in social and sexual terms. What did I do? I was so stunned the conversation moved on with little disruption!

The point is that many men still think primarily in terms of a patriarchic relationship with women. They know women as mothers, sisters, wives, lovers, or casual sexual partners. An enormous amount of organization life where genders mix is colored by this experience. Not only does evoking such relationships transform the relatively unfamiliar into the familiar, it has the comfort of well defined and accepted male dominance. At its worst the result is directly or indirectly sexual, as in this example; at its more bearable it is chivalrous. There are occasional islands of task activity, periods of time in which the gender of participants is all but forgotten, but no one really forgets the gender of those they work with, and most men seem to deal with it best by reinforcing hierarchical structures in the work place with even more deeply entrenched dominance structures from outside the workplace.

It is important to note that women, too, can be uncomfortable in the workplace. Most of us do not inherit ways of defining ourselves that take into account deep ambition, the possession of power, and our own talent. If we are even a little unsure of where we are going, or how to get there, we are less likely to complain if the boss makes a completely irrelevant reference to a social life that is none of his business.

More discouraging, too many of us seem to work proactively to ensure a place for ourselves by becoming indispensable in the ways we know best. We make things op-

⁴ For an interesting description of female/male differences and discomfort in action, see Williams' (1989) discussion of women in the Marine Corps and men in nursing.

erate more smoothly. We attend to detail. We worry excessively about 'pressing' problems. We even begin feeding people - making arrangements for coffee, inviting people to lunch.

In brief, professional women in organizations often make themselves and others more comfortable by filling the social roles our culture has established - mother, sister, wife, lover - and the most attractive of this set, especially for the professional woman, appears to be the role of the wife. (Actually, "sister" would be more appealing to me in a forced choice situation. But the role is less deeply entrenched, more varied. It does not reach as many people, or fit their needs as completely.)

I increasingly feel that discomfort in the work place is extraordinarily powerful and that professional women have done little to overcome it. Publicly we are confident. Even privately our thoughts are often positive, but at least subconsciously a small part of us seems to believe we can assure a future for ourselves in an unfamiliar place by doing what many of our mothers did to assure a place for themselves. The men we work with react to their own discomfort, perhaps subconsciously, by similarly evoking familiar roles.

There are two other forces that make it even more likely that, comfortable or not, professional women will be cast in wifely roles. First, important changes in the economic environment are increasing the need for wifely skills. As more companies become international in scope, communication and coordination become more important and more difficult among people with diverse backgrounds. "Time to market" is an increasingly important dimension of competition that requires new control over detail, more coordination and more communication. We are linking activities of buyers and suppliers in many new ways; we are seeking more joint venture partners. These cooperative strategies also make getting along with others (a wifely skill) important. Similarly, many organizations are responding to increasing global competition and other economic pressures by downsizing and becoming less hierarchical, which pushes new detail work into the professional ranks.

These trends merely hint at an enormous and growing need for people with wifely skills in the middle and at the top of organizations - skills women employees tend to have. John Naisbitt argues in his popular book *Megatrends 2000* that women in the next century will gain because they can provide what organizations now need in greater abundance. Sally Helgesen makes the same argument in her new book *The Female Advantage*. Judy Rosener has just suggested in the *Harvard Business Review* that women may begin in "positions consistent with the roles they played at home," but they can turn lack of authority and control into a transorganizational leadership style that will allow them to become especially successful managers.

I am not so sanguine!

The unanswered question is whether we can use our skills in ways that will be visible to and rewarded by the organization. We are acting and being asked to act in ways that in private life have long been expected, rarely thanked, and even less often tangibly rewarded. Why should we expect this longstanding pattern to change in a public setting?

I am circling back to the thought that we are facing the worst of the traditional wife's dilemma. Organizations want and need hot meals on time all right, but I still think they do not want to know how it is done, rarely say thank you, and even less often reward services rendered.

We are particularly at risk because in the face of their great need organizations establish and unthinkingly replicate routines. Once we have taken notes in a meeting, it is very likely that we will be asked to do so again. Once we have arranged a going away lunch successfully, eyes will turn our way when another departure is announced. Once we have marshaled a complicated data base, we will be expected to maintain it. After two or three such events, wifely contributions become part of the organization's established way of getting things done and are given little additional attention.

The women's movement may have sensitized us (and our male colleagues) to avoid the note taking trap - but in fact a very large number of maintenance and support activities are needed by organizations, at all levels of the hierarchy, including the professional ranks we congratulate ourselves for having achieved. For every note taking assignment we avoid, it seems many other professionally detrimental assignments are now expected.

These maintenance level inequalities may seem trivial, but relatively small differences in initial behavior can lead to major differences in work allocation.⁵ To illustrate, let's say that some 'typical' woman, sensitive to feminist issues, is only 10% more likely than the average employee to volunteer for maintenance kinds of activities. Her male colleague is sensitive to feminist issues, so he is only 10% less likely to volunteer. Nonetheless, he has a significant advantage, because he is expending 40% of the energy used for these things, while she is expending 60%.

Over time this advantage is likely to widen. He knows she is better at certain things, and he is pressed by his own responsibilities, so he lets her take the lead a little more often. Meanwhile the boss is likely to recognize the differences in their abilities and appoint her (just a little more than average) to the next task that requires relational skills, a task that is only a little more likely than average to be something like a difficult personnel review. Then, because the boss is genuinely concerned about balancing the work load, he will appoint his male employee to other short term work, say working out details on a new supplier contract. The result is that the male employee has important information of ongoing importance to the organization, while her contribution to a comfortable work environment is likely to be forgotten over time. It does not take many such actions and she is doing perhaps 70% of the less important tasks while he is at 30%. That's enough to make a significant difference in his chance for early promotion. But if she is aware of the dynamic and tries to resist it, she is not likely to be taken seriously. She may even be resented for making a 'mountain out of a mole hill,' since any single inequity is usually trivial.

I do not denigrate those who choose to work primarily within the home. But I believe that the wifely role within the organization has all of the disadvantages so frequently catalogued for domestic life, and virtually none of the advantages. There is an enormous amount of repetitive drudgery at home, but there is also autonomy, some abil-

⁵ Schelling points to many different examples of this interesting dynamic in [Micro Motives-Macro Behavior](#).

ity to vary the day to day flow of activity, and a sense of competence in personally juggling the many demands on ones time. There is the enormous pleasure of meaningful relationships with children, and the satisfaction of creating an environment that supports people we love. At home (in hope, if not in practice), there is reciprocity for domestic services.

There is far less autonomy in structuring organization work and I personally find that the novelty and competence to be gained from "mediating, sorting, mending , and soothing," in Lillian Rubin's words, pales when compared to the rewards of other professional tasks. Respect and admiration may help justify these services, but they are far less compelling than love.

The repetitive drudgery of housework, however, is at least as great in the organization as at home and we have inherited the tacit expectation of service with almost none of the reciprocity. There certainly does not seem to be anything in becoming the wife of the organization that compares to the pleasure of snuggling babies or smelling herbs cut in the garden. On balance, I think we should resist, should help each other resist, the many forces pulling us to take on wifely tasks.

What Can We Do?

The key forces I have identified as subverting professional women into spending time and energy as organization wives are:

1. the desire to live in ways that connect us to others
2. a 'radar' that continually alerts us to the needs of others and to the tasks that still remain to be done
3. the tendency of both men and women to adopt familiar social roles when they are uncomfortable with women in professional roles
4. the growing need for relational skills in organizations
5. the tendency of groups to institutionalize useful supportive behaviors and treat them as assumed routines.

I am sure these are not the only things going on, but they do point out some compelling reasons why so many of us find ourselves acting like wives in our organizations.

Scale is a key problem in this dynamic. Organizations present us with far too many opportunities to serve, and since by definition professionals are responsible for much of their own time, there is no overseeing intelligence to realize that in aggregate evoked relational claims exceed the reasonable.

I find it relatively exhausting to be a member in good standing of an extended family of three parents, one grandmother, seven siblings and their families, but at least we are all relatively aware of each other's work load. I know perhaps two to three hundred people in my university who might call and say, "Anne, I know you're busy, but could you... " Few of these colleagues know each other or the demands others are making.

That's not all. I have worked at three universities and their graduates still deserve some support. I am actively involved in two professional associations. I review for five or six journals and have recently taken on two ongoing editorial positions. I have published things that occasionally elicit letters from around the world to "please look

at this paper, review this tenure case, or come talk at our university." These relational claims, each legitimate in my scheme of things, threaten to overwhelm me. My male colleagues must be equally connected, but their productivity and good humor seem less threatened. A key difference seems to lie in wifely traits.

More specifically, I have come to believe that I and other professional women should focus on seven changes of behavior:

1. We must learn to say no. It is critical that we learn more effective ways of denying requests to become involved in secondary activities. I keep a file of 'no' letters and am trying to get better at using them. One of the early ones has had wide circulation as a model among my colleagues. It says:

Thank you for asking me to become involved in X, which is an important contribution to this community and one that I value. However, I must decline. As an untenured assistant professor, I feel the interests of the university, as well as my own interests, are best served by focusing on my research.

This is a letter that can be adapted to many demands and one that needs to be rewritten at every stage in one's career. The key idea is that it is neither in our best interest, nor in the best interest of the organization that employs us, to serve too much.

Of course we all have a responsibility to contribute to the communities of which we are a part. We should not deny every request, but we must become better gatekeepers. The overload demands triage. This is the term used to describe a hard-hearted way of sorting the wounded from battle that is also an established part of emergency room procedure. When under pressure, a medic looks at the incoming wounded and divides them into three categories - those who will live without medical help, those who are likely to die even with medical help, and those for whom medical care may mean the difference between life and death. The doctors and nurses first focus on this last group; the others must wait. I am trying to do the same. Further, I am trying to remember that I am not the only medic available. Within the organizations I contribute to, I want to focus my energy on a few situations where I think I can make a difference and firmly walk away from the many other deserving and not so deserving situations that also try to claim my time.

2. We must learn to relinquish control over the trivial and stop micro-managing. Saying no to other people's requests is not enough. We also have to quell the internal radar that establishes a larger agenda than most of our colleagues would dare request. The key, I think, is to relinquish the standard setting that leads us to over-respond to the things we notice.

In the administrative job I described earlier I bought china mugs and served coffee from ground beans in my office - even though I do not drink coffee myself! I spent enormous amounts of time planning, writing, and polishing presentations and formal reports. I thought we should color coordinate our report covers, and personally found appropriate paper stock. I worried about the glare of fluorescent lights on computer screens in the labs and started arguments about putting electrical outlets in more convenient locations. I noticed that the seam in the new carpet would fall in an area of high wear and had the contractor change the layout. I worked hard to keep IBM,

university administrators, and the faculty informed about our work. I worried about fair compensation for clerical help and student assistants.

I felt strongly about all these things and many more, and got considerable pleasure from doing a good job in these areas. But aren't they familiar in tone and diversity? The housewife has forceful feelings about so many things - the proper amount of clothing for a child to wear outdoors in the winter, the way to get a bathroom really clean, the correct relationship of forks, knives, and napkins. The standards are almost always inherited; they often operate without being consciously examined; in aggregate they can mushroom beyond the possibility of control. To gain more control over our time, we need to examine every single thing we do and ask whether it is worth doing just because it would be nice to have.

3. We must be willing to share the relational tasks that still need to be done. Being good at maintaining human relationships is the hidden power base of women. Many of us have some work to do before we can accept the fact that in a more egalitarian world we will not be establishing all the relational standards. We think we want to share the burdens, we say we want to, but many of us find it difficult to let go. I have become painfully aware of the many mothers who speak about the need for fathers to take a more active role in parenting and denigrate their mates for not doing their share. Too often, however, when the beloved child falls and hurts herself, this is the same woman who elbows the comforting father aside, scoops up the child in her own arms, and provides the solace that she apparently believes she alone can provide.

In organizational settings, I am trying to be more careful about similarly subverting cooperation. I cannot say "Let's all think about this and get together on it in the morning," and then arrive with a conclusion when morning comes. I have to stop criticizing, even internally, the department lunch that is just a quick stop at the local hamburger hangout. If care and feeding are desirable (and they may not be worth the time and effort) then the standards for care and feeding have to be group standards.

If we seriously share standard setting, we are almost certain to find that our wifely support is not uniformly appreciated. Across the small sample I have queried, several men report that women's constant radar often detracts from organizational purpose. Once I started thinking about it, I decided my radar's constant hum annoyed me as well.

I have also been amazed by how often men simply do not realize what we do. I recently had dinner with a colleague, a member of NOW since the 1960s, who was bemoaning the difficulties of promoting women professionals. When I said one problem was that women get caught in time consuming detail, he looked blank. I persisted with an example from his own university, naming a woman who had done an enormous amount of organizing and telephoning for an organization to which they both belong. His response: "But I called too!" This is a classic case. He clearly made decisive contributions, but I am quite confident that the relative effort is at least the 30/70 split I hypothetically suggested earlier. It was instructive to realize that a gap that large would not be recognized by this relatively sensitive colleague.

Once again, I do not want to say that we should completely turn away from detail and caring. The kind of organization I want to live in does have some hot meals on

time, but it also has a lot more cooks showing up in the kitchen. This leads me to my fourth suggestion.

4. We must expect more from our male colleagues and less from our female colleagues. If we are to avoid old patterns, we need to work on what we expect from each other. As we ask why men undervalue the things we do, for example, and do not respond often enough to legitimate organization needs, we should remember that this behavior has long been condoned - by women. Collectively and literally we are the mothers who raised them, the sisters who played with them as children. They went to grade school, high school, college, and university with us. They are our lovers, our spouses, our neighbors. Over the years, in many different settings, we have never effectively called them to account.

We must stop letting men off the hook so easily. We must stop assuming that 'of course he won't be very sensitive to the fact that George has just come out of a program for alcoholics' or 'of course we can't expect him to do a good job of orienting new employees.' Most of the men of my acquaintance need to be more responsible about the smaller peripheral things that need to be done. We have to find more effective ways of asking.

On the other hand, professional women tend to ask too much from each other. When you want a job done right, do you rely on your female colleagues? How do you react when a female colleague denies your request? I think something subtle and time draining is at work among professional women. We expect each other to be available and generally supportive - at the least we expect early warning from the woman who plans to counter a position we hold. We want little notes on the material we pass back and forth. We want chat. We hope for an interesting dinner. In sum, I suspect our ideas about good female collegueship do not come from the old boy network we have heard so much about -they mirror the family network. That sets too high a standard for most professional relationships; it takes too much time and energy. Many of us will find our closest friends among our female colleagues, but we must not apply the norms of personal relationship too broadly; they are exhausting.

5. We must learn to focus. Too few of us have the concentration that really significant accomplishment requires - the ability to see just one thing, to put all our energy in one place. We cannot keep our heads down when the place is up in arms, or sacrifice a dozen worthy aims so that one monumental thing can be accomplished. More of us must learn this skill if women are to succeed in the professions. We must say no to many things so we can say yes to one or two. By trying to do many things (at work and at home), we do not do enough of them really well.

I feel strongly about this point, but it is difficult to achieve. Almost all of us have been raised with our radars in constant operation. We learned to be polite, to think about others, to worry about how we look to others. Even if we were also praised for being smart and able, we were trained to always work on multiple agendas. The result, as I have already said, is that we are ill equipped to focus on significant achievement. In fact, most of us do not do anything with single-minded focus. We cannot even play single mindedly.

When Jim takes one of our children fishing, they go fishing. When I take somebody fishing, not only am I more likely to get sidetracked by wildflowers, interesting rocks,

and broad thoughts about the nature of the universe, there is almost always a little calculating voice inside me saying things like "if we can get back to the car by 4:30, we'll be able to get milk for breakfast before the store closes." That voice means that I am never really off work. But I am rarely totally at work, either. For when I am in my office, too often the same voice inside me says "if I leave ten minutes early to pick up David from daycare, I can stop and get milk for breakfast."

Do not relax if you do not pick up children from daycare or have grocery shopping responsibility. The same voice nags both of us to think about setting up tomorrow's meeting when the task of the moment is today's report. The same voice makes us stay and listen to the secretary whose mother is ill, even when we have only ten minutes to prepare for a conference call.

The people who can help us learn how to work and play with more concentration are our successful male colleagues. Many of them do know how to concentrate. The ability to tune out, to be inaccessible, to erect a wall that shuts out the minor to and fro of day-to-day life, is an important thing. Successful male professionals say no all the time, with little apparent guilt. They are able to let other people do things to support and help them. They let many imperfect things go by so they can concentrate on the few for which near perfection will really make a difference. We need to do more of the same.

The logic of focus applies to our private lives as well as our professional lives. Once I began thinking more seriously about saying no professionally, it was easier to say no to a request to be Cub Scout Den Mother - a job I would neither enjoy nor be good at, but one that I felt an obligation to take because our son David would gain so much from scouts.

As I thought about focus, I also realized that my closest friends and family were getting a smaller proportion of my time than I wanted them to have. I have been pleased that more attention has increased the depth of my connection with the people I care most about.

More focus on both the private and professional sides of the equation will help us define the success we want. In the past, when I looked at the men who were most recognized in my field and others, I was more aware of the things sacrificed than I was of the accomplishment. I decided not to play their game long ago, and I am rarely sorry or jealous, though I am not a complete stranger to either emotion. Nonetheless, I now feel I have been too smug. I was balancing life with our two delightful children against any other success the world could offer. I would gratefully watch my internal scale tip to my side almost every time a male colleague received a tangible reward I might have gained. That is too easy. With more focus I can achieve more of the professional results I value. I intend to learn to focus from the successful men I know.

6. We must use voice and exit options more actively, loyalty options more sparingly. Albert Hirschman wrote an interesting book in 1970 titled *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. One basic argument is that those who are dissatisfied in organizations may choose to stay out of loyalty but they also have the option of complaining (using their 'voice') or exit. I have already claimed that organization wives are less likely to complain, at least in public, about aspects of organization life that do not serve them.

Loyalty seems to be a key part of suppressing voice. It also can stand in the way of exit, when exit might be more appropriate.

There is an encouraging, though relatively informal, study reported by Cathy Trost that indicates professional women are more likely to change jobs than men, and they do so in general not for stereotyping concerns about flexible hours and adjacency to children, but because they do not like their work. I hope this behavior is more widespread than I realize. I suspect, however, that the women who had the courage (and financial security) to leave, rarely voiced their complaints in a way that had an impact on the offending organization. As Carol Gilligan (1982) and many others have pointed out, boys spend an enormous amount of time arguing about the rules of group play, girls tend to stop playing if they do not like the way things are going.

It worries me, too, that many of the women who are leaving are going to work for themselves. In fact, I believe that women start more entrepreneurial ventures around the world than men. Once again, I view apparent good news with a jaundiced eye, however, because women seem to seek, or be allowed to find, many niches that replicate the old problematic pattern. Women "have a penchant for customer service, patience, details, and are sensitive to customers' needs," I read in my airline magazine. They are "better listeners;" they have "more empathy." Great. But I worry about a female inability to obtain financial and other rewards for responsiveness and sensitivity. I also worry that female entrepreneurs will be less likely than their male counterparts to close a marginal business, continuing to limp along by using their own energy as the equity of last resort.

In other words, I am worried when we stay, and worried when we go. Many of us seem, on balance, to be rather indiscriminate in offering our energy and talents and too forgiving in judging the results that follow. Unbounded energy and persistent hope are perhaps the ideal combination for raising young children. They are more problematic in intimate relationships, and ultimately disastrous in the workplace.

7. We must become more reflective. At Christmastime Jim and I have always gone back to the town the two of us grew up in. A few years ago Jim turned to me the day after we arrived and said "What do you want to do?" I responded with a list of last minute presents, and a family sledding trip. He persisted: "You always think of things for other people here; I want to do something that you want to do." I worked on it. It surprised and almost panicked me that, in that context and at that time of year, I could not give him a satisfactory answer. I wanted my parents to be happy, and we have so little time with them. I wanted our daughter to have a chance to visit her favorite store in the mall. I wanted to take our family to his brother's house and spend some time chatting with my sister-in-law. I wanted him to have a chance to play racquetball with his brother. Despite my strong ego, I realized there is no 'me' independent of these relational claims in Grand Junction, Colorado in December.

These ties to the universe are critical to my happiness. If men risk not knowing the intensity of such connections, however, I risk not knowing myself independent of them. I believe I am speaking for almost all women - even those without immediate family. We are tied to our friends, to our communities, to our colleagues, to the interesting lady met by chance in the grocery store.

We could profit from a clearer view of who we are, independent of these connections. We risk spending our lives asking "what do you want?" of others, but not of ourselves. The great risk is that we will therefore not be able to discover and use our abilities.

I find men much more helpful guides in this area than women. Peter Senge is particularly apropos to this talk about professional responsibility because he specifies in *The Fifth Discipline* the organizational reason why we must pay more attention to ourselves:

People with high levels of personal mastery are continually expanding their ability to create the results in life they truly seek. From their quest for continual learning comes the spirit of the learning organization. (pp 114)

Thus, the final argument for resisting becoming wives of our organizations is that the traditional male/female division of labor limits the future of the organization itself. If we can curb our tendency to perform so many domestic tasks at work, we will have the time and energy to develop professional skills that may contribute even more to organizations than Naisbitt, Helgesen, and Rosener imagine.

Will It Work?

That's it. These are the seven things I am trying to do, and that I recommend to you:

- say "no" much more often
- curb micromanagement
- share with men the relational and detail tasks that need to be done
- expect more from men, less from women
- learn to focus
- use voice, manage loyalty, and be willing to exit
- define self for professional as well as personal gain.

Perhaps the list is too long. It certainly risks losing the focus I claim we must achieve. There are also questions about whether these things will work for us. Four things seem particularly problematic to me. First, this is an assertive agenda. It asks that women professionals step back from the organizations they serve and manage their loyalty to those institutions. I am certain most male professionals in the U.S. are doing this without qualm today, and yet I think the male standard does not serve organizations. Though I am pessimistic and wary, it is possible that a new organizational paradigm will emerge, one that can benefit from feminine skills without exploiting them. The things I propose, too rigorously applied, might subvert that desirable future.

There is also the question of whether it serves us to distance ourselves from the settings in which many of us now chose to spend so much time. Many of us have walked away from putting primary effort into making our home environments comforting and rewarding. Now I am advocating something similar for the work environment. The cost of seeking comfort in the workplace, I have argued, is higher than most of us realize. But context is more important to us than to most of our male colleagues. We need to find comfort and connection somewhere.

Then there is the question of whether we can do the things I have just outlined. When our daughter Betsy was young, Jim was concerned that I would over protect her, and I agreed that the words "be careful" were coming out of my mouth far too often. So I tried to let her do more. One day at the shopping mall she jumped off a bench (pretending it was an elevator) and split open her chin on the floor. Blood and screams. People looking at me with both concern and 'bad mother' in their eyes. As soon as I picked her up, I knew we were headed for the emergency room, though the cut was not really serious. Waiting for the surgeon to put five stitches in her chin, I realized that I was feeling two strong emotions - guilt but also confusion. Once I went beyond the point where I would instinctively draw the line, I did not know where to draw the line. I did not know how to let her risk more in a way that would protect her from risking too much. I have returned to that feeling again and again while writing this talk. If we abandon the wifely behavior so many of us naturally pursue, we are at risk of not knowing where to draw the line.

It will probably take generations before women have good instincts for protecting and facilitating their professional lives while also supporting community and connections. In the meantime I do not think we will get much help redrawing the boundaries. In fact, as I am sure you already know, we will be resisted and punished. Men are not used to hearing "no" from women. They expect us to take the extra time to be thoughtful and helpful. They anticipate that some woman will organize the details. They do not like a demanding woman, or one who does not respond to them because she is focusing on her own work. Certainly they expect to be the ones who leave.

Is This a Feminist Statement?

I have been positively influenced by Gilligan's ethic of caring and by many other feminist works, but based on admittedly limited reading, feminism does not seem to offer enough guidance for the professional dilemmas I have just outlined. To better accomplish tasks that are large and small, private and public, I believe women and men need a new ethos, a new perspective.

If men can learn from us, they may be less likely to find themselves teetering over the mid-life abyss that opens with the realization of being emotionally untethered to the rest of the universe. When people say to me "It's wonderful that Jim does so much with your children," they seem to mean that I am lucky to have fewer childcare and household responsibilities than most women with careers outside their homes. I am. But Jim is even more fortunate.

When they are hurt, our children are as likely to turn to him as to me, because he has always been there for earaches and scouts and spelling tests. They want him to know about their achievements, but they also share with him the day-to-day events that many men do not have the patience to listen to or the background to understand. He has the satisfaction of making substantive as well as financial and standard-setting contributions to their lives. They have tangible evidence that he literally cares for them. It is a wonderful foundation for their lives and his. Many women have recognized the rewards of making such an investment in their private lives. A significant number of men need help in understanding why and how to achieve these connections.

What do we want to learn on the opposite side of the equation? I have said it is greater accomplishment, and believe it. But many of the things that men now work to achieve in organizations come out with mixed reviews. Many of their accomplishments do not last, and should not last. Merged companies fight for decades after the papers are signed, losing promised productivity. A surprising number of international expansions are not as profitable as anticipated. Shopping malls kill downtowns and in the process diminish the sense of community that flourished there. The list could go on and on. Women have had much less to do with these questionable efforts than men. We have to be careful as we move into the organizational territory established by men.

There are many explanations for disappointment in the results of organizational action, but one consistent theme in my analysis is that the men who put the plans together were insufficiently aware of the human implications of their actions. The big plans being made in organizations these days are almost always one sided - they emphasize financial analysis and windows of opportunity and competitive advantage, but give insufficient attention to the need to learn as well as earn, the pain of losing an established way of life, the importance of having energy and trust for the next round of activity, and the one after that. If more men become more responsive in their day to day lives, I believe they will be able to use the insight gained to improve the formulation and implementation of mergers, commercial development, and other activities. They will be more likely to make big changes that will last - that should last, with us.

But women also have much to gain from exploring new territory. For example, we can learn how to lay down a twenty four hour a day burden that many of us have carried so long we do not even notice it any more. In the middle of an important meeting, I find myself thinking that the person across the table from me is out of coffee. In the middle of a concert, I find myself thinking that the stranger across the aisle from me could use a cough drop. It would be a major, not a minor, change in my life to learn how to turn off the radar that distracts me in this way. I could not only work more efficiently, I could relax more completely.

The need for more fun is a persistent theme of the critics of corporate life. The professional women I know are as much in need of this prescription as the Type A executive for whom it was first recommended. We run too close to the line. Almost all professional women come home to a second job of unequally shared household tasks. Our children need us; our friends need us; our aging parents need us. We respond out of our need as well as theirs. I believe there is a greater cost to the way we are running our private/professional lives than we now realize.

With the energy saved by focus and restored by fun, we can begin to participate more fully in the major projects our organizations undertake. We can be more directly involved in mergers and acquisitions and capital investments. To date, almost all women have been trained to 'think small.' Thinking small is still important, but I want to think big as well. That is not an easy transition, and I think we need to borrow from the male perspective in order to accomplish it.

Philip Selznick makes an important distinction between organization administrators and institutional leaders. As things stand, we are square in the headlights of enormous administrative demands, but insufficiently prepared for real leadership.

Conclusion

I have just suggested, along with many others, that traits more widely shared by females deserve consideration and adaptation by males. Perhaps you find it easy to agree with that observation. My main argument, that traits more widely shared by males deserve adaptation by women, is less fashionable at present. But please do not misunderstand! I have argued we should learn from them, not try to operate exactly like them.

The force of my argument comes from a concern that as a business school professor I am helping prepare a growing army of women to become the shock troops of their organizations. These new recruits love the idea of being professional, and they experience some of its rewards. They need a sense of connection, and they enjoy displaying and testing their prowess by making organizations more human. They do not believe that they will be among the expendable asked to take on endless detail work. They do not think they will have to pay too high a price for being called more often than their male colleagues to gather and make a first pass through the data, or use their female talents to soothe male egos. Yet a rhetoric is emerging that will send women professionals to the front lines even more often, in greater numbers, than in the past. I think we should all stand back from the optimism of Naisbitt, Helgesen, and Rosener to become much more cautious about when and how we offer up the limited number of hours each of us has at our command.

However, I am not a melancholy person by nature, and I am moving away from pessimistic metaphors of battle and sacrifice by thinking more proactively. I am trying to protect myself, and invite you to do the same. If you remember only one sentence from this presentation, I hope it is "Thank you for asking me, but as a professional focusing on my primary responsibilities, I do not think it is in the best interest of the organization to provide more supplemental service than I now provide."

The balance will not change if time saved from one request is then squandered on other relational demands. Virginia Woolf argued that women need a room of their own. Now, when quite a few of us do have offices of our own, we are finding that physical separation is not enough. We need psychological separation. We might learn that from our successful, and almost always male, colleagues.

That's the energy behind this talk: our most successful colleagues (by professional standards) are almost always male. It makes sense to learn from them how to focus our energies to accomplish the big professional jobs that not only merit dramatic promotions but also merit a personal sense of significant accomplishment.

I do not think it makes sense to adopt the traditional standards of professional success whole cloth. But I believe that I and many others are handicapped in the achievement of interesting and worthy objectives by detail oriented and relational behaviors that are exhausting to play out in private life and impossible to fulfill in public life.

Am I saying anything new? As I forayed out of my professional domain, I found that more people than I realized have already written about these issues. Irene Claremont de Castillejo, for example, outlines many of the same male/female differences from

the perspective of Jungian psychology in *Knowing Woman*. In 415 B.C., Aristophanes outlined some of my complaints in the play *Lysistrata*.

While the basic dynamic is old, the existence of substantial numbers of female professionals is new. As we congratulate ourselves that women are gaining more professional positions, as we hope that our daughters will find it even easier to reach the same heights and go beyond, I think we need to be especially careful that we are not perpetuating ancient patterns of male dominance. I was surprised to see how enmeshed I had become in a wifely role at work. I encourage you to step back and think about whether you, too, are "forever vulnerable" to relational claims.

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